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Wednesday, May 21, 2003

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Two bills to lower drug costs approved

Associated Press

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AUGUSTA — A day after Maine won a major legal battle over prescription drug pricing, the state House of Representatives on Tuesday approved a pair of bills also aimed at lowering the costs of medications.

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One bill would require companies that manufacture prescription drugs sold in Maine to disclose to the state their expenses for marketing their products. The other calls for retail price disclosures.

"This is a consumer education and consumer empowerment bill," said Rep. Thomas Kane, D-Saco.

Kane, House chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee, said the bill is part of a larger effort that received a big boost Monday when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Maine's Rx prescription drug program can move forward.

Kane, asserting that the pharmaceutical drug industry pays 10 times more on marketing and advertising than it does on research and development, said Mainers deserve to know how much companies spend selling their products.

That information will arm consumers with more power in the marketplace, said Kane, who called it a "truth in advertising bill."

The bill says specific information provided by companies would be kept confidential in order to protect trade information, but would be available "in aggregate form" to the public.

Opponents said the bill would do nothing to lower drug prices and

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would unfairly punish drug manufacturers with \$1,000 fines for violations.

"This bill is an unprecedented intrusion into private business," said Rep. Thomas Shields, R-Auburn.

Rep. Kevin Muse, R-Fryeburg, called it "intrusive, invasive and intolerable." The bill was approved by a 76-64 vote.

Lawmakers didn't debate a bill that would require pharmacists to disclose in writing to patients the "usual and customary price" of the prescription. The bill was approved without a roll call.

A third health-related bill, which was also approved, sets caps on how much doctors can charge for copies of patients' medical records. It was approved following a brief debate by a 77-54 vote.

All three bills face further House and Senate votes.

[To top of page](#)

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